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SUBJECT: THE FIRST LADY'S VISIT TO EGYPT, MAY 23-24

Summary

1. First Lady Laura Bush's May 23-24 visit to Egypt was a public diplomacy triumph and contributed significantly to USG efforts to promote education, reform, and the role of women. In Cairo, her visit included meetings with Egyptian First Lady Suzanne Mubarak and prominent female representatives of Egyptian civil society. She toured a girls school and filmed a segment on promoting literacy on Alam Simsim, the Egyptian version of Sesame Street. She highlighted Egypt's cultural heritage by taping the American morning shows in front of the Pyramids and by touring an archeological site. In Alexandria, Mrs. Bush visited a school and the Bibliotheca Alexandrina. Press coverage of the visit was generally positive. End summary.

Meeting with Mrs. Mubarak

2. After being greeted on arrival on May 23 by Mrs. Leila Kamal Eldin Salah, wife of Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit, Mrs. Bush proceeded to the Ittihadiyyah Palace for a brief private meeting with Mrs. Mubarak. The two First Ladies were then joined by Mrs. Salah, the First Lady's Chief of Staff Anita McBride, NEA PDAS Liz Cheney, and Mrs. Connie Gray (wife of the Charge) for a meeting.

Alam Simsim Filming

3. After meeting at the palace, Mrs. Bush and Mrs. Mubarak visited the set of Alam Simsim, the Egyptian version of Sesame Street. Established with USAID funding in 1997, Alam Simsim focuses on the promotion of literacy and girls' education. The two First Ladies filmed a segment with Khokha, the three-year-old female muppet, on the importance of reading. The segment will be seen by Alam Simsim's viewership of eighty-five percent of Egyptian preschoolers and fifty-four percent of their mothers. (The current season has ended, but the Ministry of Information may seek another opportunity to air the segment soon with the two First Ladies).

Morning Shows and Women's Lunch

4. With the Sphinx and two of the Pyramids as a backdrop, Mrs. Bush participated in three American network morning shows and an interview with CNN. At the nearby Mena House hotel, Mrs. Mubarak hosted Mrs. Bush for a lunch with prominent Egyptian women. Attendees included the wives of ministers, leading academics, and senior representatives from the National Council of Women and the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood.

Visit to Girls School

5. Next, Mrs. Bush and Mrs. Mubarak visited the Abu Sir Girl Friendly School in a rural area of the Giza Governorate to highlight the importance of providing educational opportunities to Egyptian girls previously kept out of school for social or economic reasons. The Abu Sir School is a model for offering the opportunity for the girls to catch-up and eventually re-integrate into regular schools. This unique school avoids rote learning and instead focuses on encouraging creative thinking. As Mrs. Bush later remarked to Embassy staff and to Rod Eichler, the Managing Director of Apache Corporation, which funded the construction of the school, the Abu Sir School could be a model for re-introducing education to girls in Afghanistan.

Excavation Tour

16. Mrs. Bush ended her day with a tour of a newly discovered excavation site with Dr. Zahi Hawass, Secretary General of the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities. Statues found in the excavation lead archeologists to believe that the site has never been plundered by tomb raiders. Mrs. Bush held a brief press availability at the site.

Civil Society Meeting

17. The next morning (May 24), Mrs. Bush held a meet and greet with Embassy staff to thank them and their families for their government service. Mrs. Bush met with prominent women activists, and her formal comments recognized the assembled women for their contributions to Egyptian society. Mrs. Bush then departed Cairo for Alexandria.

Al-Seyouf School

18. Mrs. Bush's first stop in Alexandria was at the Al-Seyouf school complex, a model participant in the Alexandria Governorate's school reform program and a recipient of USAID educational reform funding. During the visit, she participated in an English language teaching demonstration, reviewed library research projects, and listened to instrumental and choral music performances. The stop helped to publicize USG commitment to educational reform in a setting especially appropriate to the First Lady's background as a teacher and librarian.

Bibliotheca Alexandrina

19. Mrs. Bush then proceeded to the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, a massive complex including a library, academic research facilities, a conference center, and a variety of technologically-advanced cultural heritage preservation projects - i.e., the GOE's attempt at resurrecting the ancient library of Alexandria. Her guided tour included the library stacks, an IT-enhanced project encouraging children to read, the antiquities and manuscripts collections, and an interactive, nine-screen historical and cultural video demonstration on Egypt. The visit also included a stop at a display commemorating the 2004 signing of the Alexandria Declaration, a document calling for political and economic reform across the Arab world, and the First Lady's viewing of Islamic religious manuscripts and an electronic, interactive Qur'an.

Press Reactions

110. On the evening of May 23, Nile TV reported on Mrs. Bush's visit to Alam Simsim and to the Abu Sir Girl Friendly School, emphasizing the First Lady's commitment to education for young girls and literacy. The following day, Mrs. Bush's visits to Alam Simsim and Abu Sir School were replayed on Egyptian TV (ETV), along with her visit to the Pyramids and her comments at the site. ETV reported on May 25 the First Lady's meeting with Egyptian women leaders at the U.S. Embassy, as well as her visits to a school in Alexandria and the Bibliotheca.

111. In its May 24 edition, Al-Ahram published a photo above the fold of Mrs. Bush and Mrs. Mubarak seated together under the headline: "Suzanne Mubarak Receives Laura Bush. The Two Attend Taping of Children's Program." The English-language Egyptian Gazette published a photo of the two First Ladies at Alam Simsim, seated at a table reading with the puppet character Khokha. Photos of the two First Ladies at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina ran on May 25 with brief articles emphasizing the importance of women's role in society. Additional photos on May 25 in pro-government dailies Al-Ahram and Al-Akhbar showed Mrs. Bush visiting Al-Seyouf School and the Bibliotheca.

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